

AN APPRECIATION OF ROLAND  
FARLEY

L. W. Rodenberg

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"No, thank you," she answered, "I would rather sing," and she sang a song by Roland Farley.

In the following paragraphs we shall endeavor to estimate some of the personal and musical traits which comprise the character and genius of our subject. The fact that he is without sight will of necessity enter into our calculations, although he declares that "blindness is merely an inconvenience, like a bad stomach!" By what gift did Roland Farley metamorphose from a boy at play, when his father exclaimed, "My God, he can't see the ball!" into a mature self-motivated artist of whom German critics say, "His songs are among the best that come out of America?"

The simple truth is that he is a composite of talents -- his appositions are many. It is altogether impossible to define him in the term of a single apposition, as, Farley, the musician. He is more than that: He





is Farley, the composer; Farley, the poet; Farley, the publisher; Farley, the financier; Farley, the philosopher, the aesthete, the inventor, the cherished friend, the normal man who by chance is without sight.

In an article in the Saturday Evening Post (May 29, 1926), his friend, Robert Gordon Anderson, describes him as "a tall, swarthy, strangely erect man, free from eccentricities, and refreshingly natural." His devoted sister, Ruth, writes: "In my many years of association with him I have never heard him complain or regret his blindness except as it limits his horizon. I never heard him indulge in cynicism, and I know that his capacity for suffering is infinite.

He has refined taste in literature, as we shall see, and is versatile in almost every branch of art, science, and philosophy. Farley's father deserves credit for the taste of his children for better things. "Roland," according to his sister, "very early turned from the usual children's stories and had us read Dickens, Reade, Poe, and Dumas to him. At his instance I struggled through some of Reade's novels before I was able to pronounce many of the words."

A nature so sensitive as his could not help but appreciate friends. "I am happy in my intercourse with friends," he declares. "Friendship is the most comfortable and valuable thing I know." With his friends he enjoys anecdotes, cards, and pet slang, and, since his association is with the best of artists and other successful people, his early boyhood determination to mingle with helpful associates is now bearing fruit abundantly.

He is a humorist, too, a practical one. He relates how, when a student in Berlin at the outbreak of the War, he mischievously proposed to a companion that they connive against the Kaiser, which caused him to be set upon by a small mob and brought before a police tribunal for a painful explanation. His friend, O'Malley, the noted artist who is almost deaf, assures the blind composer that he thoroughly enjoys his music, and Farley tries to convince the painter that he appreciates his drawings; upon which



[illegible]



a mutual friend comments that this is certainly the most disinterested friendship he has ever seen!

We must bring into the picture of his happiness, if not his success, the glass front of an art studio at the corner of Park Avenue and 56th Street, over which in gold letters we read the name, Elsie Sloane Farley. Through the glass we see in a soft green setting the display of an interior decorator -- furniture of various periods, Chippendales, Louis XIV's,

Governor Winthrop desks, Turkish rugs, patterns of fine wall papers, etc. Mrs. Farley has had commissions from many of the most elite homes in the East and South. She carries on her work in her own field, and he in his field has his own enterprises, but her love and devotion have inspired not only his dedication, "My Songs to You," but also have entered vitally into the whole list of his successes, so that he would agree with the lines:

"And if I conquer, 'tis to her a sign  
Of that she is, this Beatrice divine,  
Who shares with Heaven all that leads me on:  
So if I triumph, 'tis to her a sign  
My tribute I have done."

A visit to the Farley apartment on East 57th Street shows us that our composer is surrounded by all of the elegance and comfort that money can buy. His secretary, his butler, and his chauffeur are at his bidding. We are likely to find him seated at his beautiful grand, rehearsing his songs with the chosen of singers who come to him for his interpretations. In this atmosphere we are surprised to discover that he has also a mechanical bent which sometimes carries him into the field of invention. In the spring of 1931 he took out a patent on a "double sash ventilating lock," a small concealable device for locking windows at any desired elevation. A later invention applies a similar idea to the rear window of motor cars. Carpentry and cabinet work are his special hobbies. His sister tells us that



A mutual friend comments that this is certainly the most interesting

relationship he has ever seen.

He was lying face downwards on his back, at his head,

the glass front of an old cabinet at the corner of First Avenue and 34th

Street, over which in gold letters he read the name, Miss Alice Taylor.

Through the glass he saw in a soft green setting the display of an interior

decorated -- fragments of various periods, English, Louis XIV's,

seventeenth century dishes, Turkish rugs, patterns of the wall papers, etc.

He had been looking at the map of the world since he was in his

best and youth. The picture on his wall in his own little room, and in his

mind had his own enlargement, and his love and devotion have inspired not

only his dedication, "My home is here," but also have entered deeply into

the whole life of his existence, so that he would agree with the lines:

"And if I am ever, 'tis to be a sign

Of that which is, this restless living,

Who knows his heaven all that leads me on;

So if I am ever, 'tis to be a sign

Of that which is, this restless living."

A visit to the Taylor apartment on East 34th Street shows us that our

subject is surrounded by all of the elegance and comfort that money can

buy. His secretary, his father, and his children are at his bidding. He

is likely to find him seated at his beautiful grand, rejecting his books

with the ease of a king who comes to him for his investigations. In

this atmosphere we are brought to discover that he has also a mechanical

best which sometimes carries him into the realm of invention. In the spring

of 1921 he took out a patent on a "double beam ventilating fan," a small

conceivable device for forcing air into the room at any desired elevation. A later

invention applied a similar idea to the feet of a motor car. Our

gentle and cabinet work and his special hobbies. His other work is that



"as a boy he was always in the midst of some building project." Several years ago he constructed for himself a garden studio, doing all the work from foundation to roof alone.

In his triumph over blindness Mr. Farley has completely proven his theory that "determination, with attention, can more than make up for loss of sight." He relies in his work almost wholly on mental processes, on aural and imaginative acquisition of ideas, and on retentiveness of memory. Contrary to this practice, most teachers of the blind have of late stressed the utilization of raised print and written processes in it. It is probable that in the article already quoted, Mr. Anderson unwittingly exaggerated the aversion which he thought Mr. Farley has to the braille system. He quotes this finger-reader as saying: "I have always emphasized a getting away from blind psychology, and have advised blind people to stop using braille whenever possible; but they won't listen." In the autobiographical sketch which is presented as a part of our present study, Mr. Farley puts his admonitions more clearly in his own words, taking that rational middle position between aural and tactile methods which alone in reason is tenable. We can forgive Mr. Anderson on the ground of his enthusiasm, for he had before him this one example of mastery over handicap -- and it was that of his admired friend. The quotations, we guess, were recorded somewhat freely, making the subject seem to exalt himself over all other blind people, even in those things which hundreds have done as creditably as he himself. Farley could never have indulged such egotism, for he is far too self-possessed to bask in the sunlight of his own flattery. But he does insist on quite another point, namely, that educators of the deaf and the blind should root out the tendency of the handicapped to herd together. When the deaf or blind congregate in a community of associations and interests, they feel all on a level and there are no inhibitions; and Farley concludes: "But it's a fool's paradise. Twelve years of this and they are fit for nothing else, certainly not for association with normal people."



For a long time, in the midst of some brilliant project, I have  
been able to concentrate my mind on a single point, doing all the work  
from foundation to roof alone.

In his lecture on blindness, Mr. Taylor has completely proven his  
theory that "depression" is, with attention, a very real thing, and that  
of sight." He writes in his work almost wholly on mental processes, on  
moral and imaginative consideration of ideas, and on relationships of memory.  
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making the subject seem to exist himself even all other blind people, even  
in those things which moments have done as creditably as he himself.

Taylor could never have imagined with equality, for he is for the  
possessed to learn in the sunlight of his own history. But he does insist  
on quite another point, namely, that education of the deaf and the blind  
should rest on the tendency of the mind to learn by touch. When the  
deaf or blind dwells in a community of association and interest, they  
feel all on a level and there are no inhibitions; and Taylor concludes:  
"But it is a social condition. Twelve years of this and then one day  
nothing else, certainly not for association with normal people."



No modern composer has a finer appreciation or truer interpretation of the intimacies and beauties of nature. Of course we ask, how is this, and he blind? Is it by some mysterious law of heliotropism by which the morning-glory opens its native beauty to the dawn? Perhaps there is about it all some such mystery of orientation, but Farley himself gives us a practical answer. He constantly practices what has been called "visual rehabilitation" -- that is, the conscious freshening up of ideas to the normal. Most of the blind, who once possessed sight, are apt to exaggerate the naturalness and spontaneousness of their concepts, but he makes a brave and honest confession "a blind man must not only train his memory, but he must store it, and quicken all with imagination. When I realized that the world had shrunk to the length of my arm, I substituted attention and imagination for sight, conceiving things bit by bit, in a chain, going through the process rapidly, of course -- like a motion picture which is made up of countless individual motions. I can sketch in, think in, colors and other qualities; but unless I stop to do it, I am in danger of not putting them in." "Very early," writes his sister, "he realized that, while he could not see others, they could see him; that, if he was to take his place among them, he must develop every mental faculty along normal lines, and that he must think as if he could see. Thus he developed his visual images in youth. . . . Many of our vacation days were spent in the hills of Colorado where we picked flowers and indulged in the natural imaginings of children."

Regarding these matters Farley has his own philosophy. He says: "Possibly some of our concepts are inherited. It almost makes one believe in reincarnation. . . . Perhaps, too, the subconscious mind is with us, the blind, more reliable, more released. I use it constantly in composing. For instance, in writing songs it is a question of letting the words sink into the subconscious. There they mill around until they find their mates. Unexpectedly the crystallization (the wedding of words



to which we have a direct approach in the investigation  
of the human mind. Of course we are, but it is true,  
and we must be in a position to understand the  
meaning of the human mind. But there is about  
it all such a mystery of existence, but surely himself gives us a  
partial answer. The constantly growing mind has been called "vital  
realization" -- that is, the conscious realization of the ideas of the  
world. For of the mind, who once possessed it, are apt to be  
satisfied the realization and consciousness of their concepts, but the human  
mind is not human realization. It is not only that the mind is not  
and he must know it, and realize all with imagination. When I realized  
that the world had turned to the length of my arm, I substituted attention  
and imagination for sight, conceiving things not by sight, but by  
through the process rapidly, or rather -- like a motion picture which is  
not up of individual individual motions. I can sketch in, think in,  
before and after realization; but unless I stop to do it, I am in danger of  
not realizing them in. "For early," wrote his sister, "he realized that,  
while he would not see things, they could see him; that, it was to take  
the place of the world, he was to see every thing exactly as it was  
itself, and that he must think as it is really. Then he developed his  
visual images in words. . . . Many of our vacation days were spent  
in the hills of Colorado where we picked flowers and looked at the  
natural formations of California."

Regarding the realization of the human mind, he says:  
"Possibly some of our concepts are inherited. It almost seems as if we  
in realization. . . . For example, too, the subconscious mind is  
with us, the mind, more reliable, more reliable. I use it constantly in  
composition. The intellect, in writing, is a question of feeling  
the words about the subconscious. There they will come and until they  
find their way. Unconsciously the intellect (the feeling of words



and notes) takes place." Despite his reliance on subconscious methods, he is not a dreamer nor ever was, for, according to his sister, Ruth, "Roland, to my knowledge, did not resort to dreaming as an escape -- he was always too busy with other things."

That Farley's aesthetic sense, which was fed on the pabulum of the best English and German literature, should express itself in fine original verse was inevitable. He writes poetry for the same reason that a plowman whistles: it isn't his special line but it will out. He soars far above the banal and the trite, as when he wrote:

"Dreams that recall the ghosts of dead hours,  
Like remembered fragrance of rare flowers  
Yet are but dreams."

Or, has any poet ever written better verse than the following?

"Where the lake caresses little stars  
Asleep on her crystal breast."

We wish there were revealed more of his poetry. It is never effeminate, even when softest. Note the pundit-like force of:

#### MY CREED

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All things that now exist in earth

Have always been, will always be.

Before as man I had my birth,

Here, too, was every part of me.

Perhaps in rock, or tree, or stream,

In fish or bird, in toad or worm;

In all this grand eternal scheme

I, too, had place, I too had form.

How many thousand eons passed

In molding me, as I am now,

and (and) what else? "Gladly his relation to education matters, he  
 is not a dreamer but a man, for, according to his belief, truth, "Hobbes,"  
 to be a dreamer, his own dream is an escape -- he was always too  
 busy with other things."

That Tennyson's masterpiece comes, which was read on the occasion of the  
 first meeting and Tennyson's masterpiece, should express itself in the original  
 verse was inevitable. He writes poetry for the same reason that a painter  
 writes: it is not his special aim but it will come. He wrote for about  
 the same time the artist, as when he wrote:  
 "I think that I shall tell the world of days hence,  
 the wonderful experience of my life."

Not and not dreamer."  
 Oh, but any poet ever written better verse than the following?  
 "I think the lake is a great little state  
 I think of it as a great dream."  
 In what words were revealed more of his poetry. It is never effeminate,  
 even when modest. Here the quality-like force of:

THE GARDEN

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All things that now exist in earth  
 Have always been, will always be.  
 Before as now I had my dream,  
 Now, too, was every part of me.  
 Though in fact, or time, or space,  
 In fact or time, in fact or space;  
 In all this world eternal nature  
 I, too, had given, I too had loved.  
 How many thousands were passed  
 In waiting me, as I am now,



Of elements which merged at last

From God knows where, and God knows how!

I like to think; from everywhere;

From pole to pole, and sea to sea;

That land and water, cloud and air,

Were parents of some part of me.

I like to think, that when I die,

I shall return to surf and sod,

And have a share in earth and sky,

And they and I be merged in God.

Any observer, browsing about among Farley's songs, must note the excellence of his choice of poetry for his settings. (He has modestly used only a few of his own word lyrics.) He will wed his music to only the best verses, classics like those of Shelley, Byron, Browning, and Shakespeare, or modern gems like those of Oscar Wilde, Eugene Field, John Saxe, Edgar Lee Masters, and others. By being thus judgmatic in his choice of texts, he makes his music sublimate into the ethers of high art, with the consequence of enduring value. We are levitated by it to the higher planes, which is the proof of the absolute in artistic creativeness.

In a little over fifteen years of dedication to composition, Mr. Farley has produced almost two hundred works -- over one hundred and thirty songs, fifty piano pieces, four chamber compositions, four sonatas (one for piano, one for violin, one for viola, one for 'cello), a suite of "Five Chinese Poems" for piano and orchestra, and numerous other pieces and special arrangements. Scores of these works have been published.

An account of his struggles and dickerings with men in the hectic and unscrupulous publishing field would fill a volume. Some who once superciliously returned his manuscripts now meet him with apologies and regrets.

From the house, and the last time

I like to think, from the house

From the house, and the last time

From the house, and the last time

From the house, and the last time

I like to think, from the house

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Publishing houses have of late years allowed themselves to become overstocked with new works. Because of this inflation they have been unable to do justice to individual composers. In order to escape from the impasse in which he thus found himself, Mr. Farley in 1930 bought back from publishers most of his outstanding copyrights and inaugurated the New Music Press, Inc., 435 Park Avenue, New York City. So, with stimulating courage and self-reliance, this "tall and strangely erect man" faces the storms of metropolitan competition and intrigue, confident of the merit of his art and of the resourcefulness of his business acuity. That he shall hold his own, we may not doubt. When we note that in fifteen years his fortunes have been safely directed -- from the time when his sacrificing sister helped him finance his study in Germany to the time when the loss of vast sums in the recent stock market crash failed to dislodge him, -- we need have no fear for him. Only this we would make bold to hope, that his genius for creation may not be tempted from the field of music and despoiled by more drab enterprises.

Finally, now, in our study of the character and achievement of Roland Farley, we have left to us the task of trying to evaluate his music. What are its merits and characteristics? How does he rank with contemporary composers? What will be his place in the musical history of America and of the world?

At present we may assume only to guess at answers to these questions, and for dicta we must defer to the judgment of better critics. In fact, conclusions by anyone at this early period would be unreliable, for Mr. Farley, we hope, has lived less than half of his productive years. The tools of the builder have not been dulled, but rather they seem to fit themselves ever more surely into his dexterous hands. We believe that under them almost any structure may rise in the future -- perhaps great and undreamed of temples of enduring beauty to be. His creations have been







so versicolored that, if we attempt to read the future of his work, the prism of his genius will turn to us no surface with a definite ray of forecast as to likeness. And we would not have it otherwise, for, as it is, we may anticipate many extraordinary revelations.

Beyond a doubt, Farley lives and will live in his melodies, in his gift for absolute lyric. His melodies will haunt you, tantalize you, and persuade you; they take you singing into your dreams, and at dawn come laughing back at you, and you like them all the more for it. Nowhere in his music can you find a hackneyed passage. There isn't a commonplace cadence in any of his songs. Try if you can find one. You will, perhaps, come to a possible crossroad in some melodic progression, and you will tremble lest here at last is the likelihood of triteness. But you will find that the glorious thing always happens; his vitality and taste never fail, and the cadence which you questioned will take itself to its appropriate refuge, to mock and chide you for your doubt. His diction is always natural; his musical sentences are always rounded and have their say in lilting finish.

So also it is with his harmonies. He seems never to build a chord for its own sake. Unlike so many modern composers, who lead us, as it were, from color scheme to color scheme for the thrill each is supposed to convey, Farley's polyphonic progressions drive onward to the goals for which they are conceived. We may say that his music, now hyaline, now leonine, has the freshness and force of mountain lakes and streams -- it never sinks to stagnation.

Quite often his pieces are distractingly short, which is especially true of his songs, and we clamor at the composer for his brevity. After all, is this not evidence of artistic grasp and merit? Whatever flaws may lurk in his compositions, we may never properly accuse him of being prolix.

as we have seen, it is not enough to read the letters of his work. The  
power of his genius will show us in his letters with a certain way of  
thought as to himself. And we would not have it otherwise, for, as  
it is, we may anticipate many other things.  
Beyond a doubt, Joyce lives and will live in his work, in his  
gift for concrete things. His intellect will know you, but his heart  
permeates you; they take you singing into your heart, and as they come  
back to you, and you live them all the more for it. There is  
his heart and you find a bewitched passage. There isn't a connection  
between in any of his songs. The it has been said once. The will, perhaps,  
come to a possible extension in a new world's extension, and you will  
trouble first here at last in the likelihood of his work, but you will  
find that the greatest thing always happens; his vitality, and he never  
fail, and the evidence which you questioned will take itself to its proper  
place before, to show and show you for your heart. His vision is  
always natural; his natural sentences are always rounded and have their  
own in living things.  
So also it is with his work. He never seems to build a thing  
for his own sake. Unless he has some purpose, who is he, he is  
there, from which seems to refer to him for the first time in his work  
to himself. Joyce's polyphonic progression drive toward the goal  
for which they are created. We may say that his work, his vitality,  
and his heart, has the strength and force of a mountain peak and stream --  
it never seems to stagnate.  
While often his heart is rhythmically short, which is especially  
true of his songs, and we stand at the moment for his heart. After  
all, is this not evidence of artistic genius and heart? Whatever there  
may be in his composition, we may have perhaps seen him of being



A pianist by training and practice, Farley in his compositions is pianistic to perfection. Most of his song accompaniments are solos in themselves, even when the countermelody is left alone to sing for us. Transcriptions and arrangements constantly suggest themselves, and many of his vocal numbers might easily become delightful pieces for violin or 'cello.

Farley belongs to the peerage of America's best composers. He enjoys the friendship and admiration of our greatest artists. Several years ago he became a member of the Beethoven Association which admits to its membership only those who have really come to high distinction in music. He belongs to the protective organization of composers for the regulation and dispensation of royalties and safeguarding of copyrights. His songs have been sung in all parts of the concert world by the most famous of singers -- Rosa Poncelle, Frieda Hempel, Anna Case Mackay, and others. Certainly, no one in the Americas has risen out of blindness to such high recognition in music; and time may prove that in the wider field very few, if any of our contemporary composers will have surpassed him.

A student by training and practice, but in his composition is  
scientific in perfection. Most of his work arrangements are sold in the  
country, even when the country is left alone to sing for us. These  
conditions are arranged to suggest themselves, and many of his  
work numbers which easily become popular pieces for violin or solo.  
They belong to the genre of music's best composers. To enjoy  
the friendship and attention of our greatest artists. Several years ago  
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L.W. RODENBERG

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